
SCENE

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CG HEADQUARTERS—1964-1967 (CHIEF, RECREATIONAL BOATING SAFETY)

It was midsummer, hot and sticky in Washington, D.C., when I reported for duty in that old condemned Headquarters building at Twelfth Street and Pennsylvania Avenue, NW. The building was not air conditioned except for the private offices of senior officers, of which I was one. But my unit didn't do the job.

The uniform of the day was Service Dress Blue. (The short-sleeved summer uniform had not yet been invented.) The hot jacket could be removed while in the office, but had to be worn when in the hall, because when the jacket was removed there was no insignia showing rank.

I had found a parking space for my car behind the building, but it was "solid packed," meaning no entrance or departure during office hours. I had to register for a parking permit, and found I must form, or be in, a carpool of five. All meetings and conferences had to adjourn promptly at 4:30 p.m. so cars could leave and not "land lock" a line of cars.

The operations staff held a special briefing just for me to acquaint me with ongoing plans. I patiently listened to jargon splattered with staffanese. It was something about constructing a computer model of the Coast Guard. When they finished, they asked me if I had any questions. I said, "Yes. Would they mind briefing me again using plain language?...Perhaps at another time?" Agreed!

I enjoyed my job. I had a pretty free hand from the Commandant and the Chief of Operations because recreational boating didn't stack up as important as other missions.

Yet, it was a time when the boating industry was booming and needed safety regulations and standardization. There were new designs for boats and equipment, more regattas, more racing, and more challenging cruising. The basic federal regulation for recreational boats was the Motorboat Act of 1940. It was inadequate to meet the challenges of new federal waterways, new lakes built by the Bureau of Recreation, and use of federal waterways by fishermen and hunters. Numerous states had formed departments to manage the growth. Our concern was that the state regulations must not conflict with the federal. State Departments for Marine Navigation were formed, and it was our job to work with them. I traveled a lot and my assistant often traveled with me. It was a nice experience.



Our home at 5800 Conway Road in Bethesda, Maryland

To build staff positions at our Coast Guard District offices, we “stole” from other departments. Being new to staff work, I assumed that, since we were all Coast Guard, we would all work together. At one meeting in the Marine Inspection Office, my Admiral (operations) accompanied me. The Marine Inspection Admiral had one of his staff read a letter from a District Commander in which he declined to give up a billet. I had read the letter and knew that the reader had stopped right where the letter continued with a “however...” (followed by a condition we could easily meet!). I spoke up and called him on that. I was shocked! I grumbled to my Admiral as we walked back to his office. His reply, “Well, you called him on it, didn’t you?”

An enhanced boarding program for my office to run was established before my arrival. It was to board boats underway for enforcement of safety equipment laws. Any Coast Guard officer had the authority, but to conduct a good and fair inspection considerable

training was necessary. To provide good boats for boarding, the Coast Guard purchased a small fleet of seventeen-foot runabouts. To make it visibly clear when the vessel is on an enforcement or rescue mission, these little boats were equipped with a flashing blue light, as is the practice with police patrol cars. With blue about the only distinctive color left, I took the initiative to have the authority placed in the Federal Register and eventually made law.

I will close with the reminder that federal laws are far-reaching and must be carefully drafted to enhance safety, establish accountability, and be enforceable.